1: Whiting E-5 (1936-1937) 1941
OJ13 Kwoma OJ13

CHAPTER I

ENVIRONMENT, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND PERSONNEL

THE Kwoma live in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea on the Peilungua Mountains just north of the Sepik River and 265 river miles from its delta.[1] This small mountain system, not more than twenty square miles in area, is bounded on the south and west by the Sepik and a lake formed from a former oxbow in the river, and on the east and north by the vast, rolling watershed of the river which stretches to the foothills of the coastal ranges. It consists of a primary orographical feature in the shape of a letter *S* plus a series of short arterial ridges running off in all directions. From tip to tip as the crow flies the system measures a little over five miles in length. The slopes of these ridges are precipitous; in climbing it is often necessary to dig one's feet into the earth or hold onto vines to avoid falling. A dense forest of large trees covers the ridges and extends down to meet a sago swamp just above the level of the Sepik. The highest point, Ambunti Mountain, rises 1,520 feet above sea level.

The elevation of the Kwoma territory is not sufficient to cause any noticeable variation from the strictly tropical climate of the entire Sepik River Valley. The daily range in temperature, from an average of seventy-one degrees Fahrenheit at dawn to eighty-five in mid-afternoon, closely approximates the norm in the river villages. Humidity is high throughout the year. Some rain falls virtually every day and all-day storms are not uncommon, but the climate and precipitation are so uniform throughout the year that there is no clear-cut division into seasons. Gardens may be planted, cultivated, and harvested at any and all times of the year.

[1] The tribe is situated approximately four degrees and ten minutes south of the equator and one hundred and forty-two degrees and forty minutes east of Greenwich.

1: Whiting E-5 (1936-1937) 1941
OJ13 Kwoma OJ13

132 Although there is slight variation in the amount of rainfall within the annual cycle, during the months of December, January, and February the Sepik is in flood. This fact is of such importance to the river people that they divide the year into periods of high and low water. This seasonal periodicity is also noted by the Kwoma, but it is significant to them only in so far as it affects their commerce with the river people.

136 Cassowaries, wildfowl, hornbills, cockatoos, pigeons, and a great many unidentified species of smaller birds abound in the region. The only large mammal is the wild pig. The natives report that there were formerly wallabies in the region but that now there are none. There are several varieties of small tree-climbing marsupials. Many species of bats of different size despoil the fruit trees.

137 The flora of the region is tropical. The trunks of giant trees support a mat of foliage fifty to sixty feet in the air, so dense that the sun scarcely filters through it, except where the natives have cleared a garden or house site. The swamp land is full of sago palms whose thorn-studded spathes make passage difficult. Small stands of areca and coconut palms mark the sites of habitations past and present. Betel pepper vines cling to the pawpaw, breadfruit, and paper mulberry
241 trees which the natives plant near each dwelling. Many varieties of yams, taro, and greens are grown as a first crop in Kwoma gardens; these are followed by a second crop of bananas and plantains of numerous varieties.

142 The Kwoma are short, stocky, negroid people with long heads, dark frizzly hair, medium thick lips, and skin color varying from light to dark brown.[2] The homogeneity in physical type is immediately apparent, although there is one family with two generations of strikingly aberrant members, whose skin is so blond that it sunburns. The so-called Papuan, or Semitic, nose-form occurs at random about as often as the dished type. Noses with straight bridges, however, are the most common.

040 [2] Their average height is five feet four inches, and their cephalic index is in the upper range of mesocephaly (71.7 to 83.6, average 77.4). These figures were taken from twenty adult males.

1: Whiting E-5 (1936-1937) 1941
OJ13 Kwoma OJ13

The Kwoma are a mountain-dwelling people. Except for the southeastern slope of Ambunti Mountain, site of the Ambunti Police Post,[1] they control the entire segment of the Peilungua Range which lies northwest of the Sepik. The territory they claim also includes enough of the sago swamps at the foot of these mountains to provide them with more than enough of the sago flour which is a staple in their diet. They are surrounded by swamp and river tribes. Living in the sago swamp somewhat to the northwest are the Amiki and Sowal people, and on a little group of hills to the northeast, separated by the swamp from the main range, live a half-dozen households who call themselves Yelagu. The Malu, Yambon, and Yessan, the river neighbors of the Kwoma, are linguistically and culturally distinct from the mountain people. When they converse with each other, each speaks his own language, which the other understands.

The Kwoma tribe consists of four subtribes: the Tangwishamp, the Urumbanj, the Koriasi, and the Hongwam.[2] Their territories are contiguous. The Hongwam, who dwell nearest Ambunti, were the group from which nearly all the data here presented were gathered, only a brief trip being made to the other three subtribes. These four subtribes, although speaking the same language and bound by not a few ties of trade and intermarriage, are distinct social entities and are not above carrying on head-hunting raids against one another.[3] More frequently, however, they will band to-

[1] While the fieldwork on which this report is based was being carried on, Ambunti was still a functioning administrative post. Since then this station has been moved to Marui, approximately thirty-five miles downstream, to facilitate communication with the District headquarters at Wewak.

[2] The terms "tribe" and "subtribe" have been adopted here although it might be objected that, since there is no political organization which unites these four groups, it is improper to call the Kwoma a tribe.

Native Name	*Name Appearing on Maps and in Australian Record Books*	*Population*
Hongwam	Waskuk—Bangus	374
Koriyasi	Chissaraman (Shasherman)	116
Urumbanj	Urumbans (Urumbanji)	108
Tangwishamp	Tanguinjambi (Taunjambi)	*circa* 300

Hongwam is referred to as Washkuk by M. Mead in *Sex and Temperament* and in "The Mountain Arapesh: I. An Importing Culture," *Anthro-*

l: Whiting E-5 (1936-1937) 1941
OJ13 Kwoma OJ13

dangerous. Children compensate for the taboo against the use of real spears by playing several dart-throwing games. A favorite sport of this type consists in tossing a pawpaw[a] up a slope and attempting to transfix it with a sharpened bamboo dart as it bounds down. In another common game, children toss a rock into the air and try to hit it with stones before it falls to the ground. As a result of such games, they become very adept at hitting moving objects, a habit which stands them in good stead when they become old enough to go pig-hunting.

Kwoma children participate in caring for the domesticated animals of their parents. They are given a small pig of their own to tend which they must feed, habituate to the dwelling, and teach to come at their call. Parents often give their child a puppy to pet and care for. A child calls his pets by the kinship term for *son* or *daughter;* the other members of the family refer to the pet by kin terms which accord with this relationship.

Fishing is considered by the Kwoma rather as a sport than as a serious activity. Girls participate in what little is done, often simply scooping fish from a swamp pool or mountain stream with their hands. Although men do not deign to waste their time fishing, boys sometimes accompany their mothers and sisters to the stream and join in the fun. Even as children, however, they feel that they somewhat demean themselves by doing this.

Children watch their parents make tools but do little such work themselves. Boys sometimes help their parents by fetching materials for various utensils, and girls begin netting bags before they reach adolescence, but otherwise toolmaking is restricted to older persons.

In general, the Kwoma child discovers that it is necessary to work to get food, and learns, in part by observation and in part by participation, the techniques that have been developed in the culture for producing it. He is forced to assume responsibility for some of this work, is allowed to help with

[a] A tropical fruit about the size, shape, and consistency of a small muskmelon.

133
•137

View of the Sepik River taken from near Rumbima house tamberan. The forested slopes of the Peilungua range upon which the Kwoma dwell may be seen in the right foreground and left center. The sago swamp at the base of this range extends from the left foreground to the right center. The light section which is partially surrounded by this swamp is a mat of grass floating on the lake, the unchoked part of which may be seen beyond. Above and to the right of the lake may be seen glimpses of the Sepik as it winds its way around the spur at the left toward Ambunti. See Chapter I, page 8.

I: Whiting E-5 (1936-1937) 1941
OJ13 Kwoma OJ13
[p.168-A]
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114 February 11, 1936. Since the last installment, there had been a trip to Yambon where the mosquitoes were plentiful and the heat intense: a long forlorn wait at Ambunti for a pinnace to take us down the river for Christmas, but none came; a trip to Tangwishamp where they told me that the next village had murdered Mr. Eve and all his party, which got me pretty scared; a visit from Bob Overall, a recruiter, who bought five boys here and entertained us for three days with tales of his experiences on the river and elsewhere; and a trip to the Yellow river station by Tip, who will write about it later in this document.

128 Anything like a day by day account, is of course impossible, so I think the best thing to do at this point is to summarize the culture

133 briefly as it looks to us at this point. The Kwoma is a group of mountains running north and west of the government station at Ambunti which are known as the Feilungua range. The Sepik river runs around the south and east edges of these mountains, and the great sago plane which stretches to the Dutch border and to the sea bounds them on the west and north. From Ambunti station at their south-eastern tip, to Tangwishamp at their north-western is a distance of about ten miles. The mountains consist of a series of short ridges running in all directions, the general trend being in the form of a S, its beginning at Ambunti, its end at Tangwishamp, we being situated about in the middle of the diagonal. The slopes of these ridges are very precipitous; it is usually necessary either to dig ones feet into the earth or to hold onto vines and roots to keep ones footing.

[137] A dense forest of large trees covers the whole area except for small garden plots cleared here and there. The highest point, Ambunti Mountain, is 1320 ft. above sea level.

*115 584 883 marry her at all he thought that she would probably be married by the time he returned; if not he would marry her.

February 3, 1937.

*115 752 123 657 The sore on Gwiyap's leg, which developed when we were still at Ambunti, still does not heal properly, and looks pretty bad. Several times before he has suggested going in to the station. We was going in today to meet Tip so I decided to send Gwiyap. I told him last night and at first he agreed to go, but then he began to think of reasons why he should not go. I insisted. This morning he again tried to get out of it, saying that Mar had told him to wait for him. I looked at him, and he grinned sheepishly and said, "All right, I'll go."

Summary made February 11, 1937.

128 133 Anything like a day by day account, is of course impossible, so I think the best thing to do at this point is to summarise the culture briefly as it looks to us at this point. The Kwoma is a group of mountains running north and west of the government station at Ambunti which are known as the Peilungua range. The Sepik River runs around the south and east edges of these mountains, and the great sago plane which stretches to the Dutch border and to the sea bounds them on the west and north. From Ambunti station at their south-eastern tip, to Tangwishamp at their north-western is a distance of about ten miles. The mountains consist of a series of short ridges running in all directions, the general trend being in the form of a S, its beginning at Ambunti, its end at Tangwishamp, we being situated about in the middle of the diagonal. The slopes of these ridges are very precipitous; it is usually necessary either to dig ones feet into the earth or to hold onto vines and roots to keep ones footing. [137] [241] A dense forest of large trees covers the whole area except for small garden plots cleared here and there. The highest point, Ambunti Mountain, is 1520 ft. above sea level.